

**Review of Fiona Black, The artifice of Love: Grotesque bodies and the song of songs
[book review]**

Kelso, Julie-Anne

Published in:
The Bible and Critical Theory

DOI:
[10.2104/bct.v7i1.357](https://doi.org/10.2104/bct.v7i1.357)

Licence:
CC BY-NC

[Link to output in Bond University research repository.](#)

Recommended citation(APA):

Kelso, J-A. (2011). Review of Fiona Black, The artifice of Love: Grotesque bodies and the song of songs: [book review]. *The Bible and Critical Theory*, 7(1), 84-88. <https://doi.org/10.2104/bct.v7i1.357>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

For more information, or if you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact the Bond University research repository coordinator.

Review of Fiona Black, *The Artifice of Love: Grotesque Bodies and the Song of Songs*. London and New York: T&T Clarke/Continuum, 2009.

Julie Kelso, Bond University

What do we presume when we read or hear a love poem? We presume that the depiction of the lovers will be flattering, surely? Even if the beloved is not described as beautiful by our own cultural standards or perhaps even those of the poet's, the reader understands that the lover-poet will ultimately look beyond those flaws and still convey something special, indeed beautiful, and this will be the truth, not some false flattery. It is not simply that beauty is in the eye of the beholder; when it comes to love, it quite legitimately can be the case that love is blind. Nevertheless, readers of the *Song of Songs* have long been perplexed by the poetic rendering of the lovers bodies. Such readers presume that, given that this is a love song, the overall picture has to be a flattering one. Each lover, in seeking to represent their beloved's body, must surely be striving for an image of beauty, or at least to convey the beauty that (only) they see. And yet, the text time and again proffers only curious, even absurd imagery that confounds any real sense of understanding on the part of the reader. Quite simply, we are not really convinced. As Fiona Black points out in her superb book *The Artifice of Love: Grotesque Bodies and the Song of Songs*, biblical critics are troubled by these strange bodies because they jar with the ideals we expect to encounter when we read or hear a love poem. Furthermore, such critics have gone to great lengths to smooth over these problematic descriptions. There is a long history of various readers' attempts to untangle the often mysterious images used to convey the "beauty" of the beloved (a long neck is one thing, but a neck like the tower of Babylon? Or, breasts like gazelles?).

In Chapter One, "The Problem of the Body in the Song of Songs", Black provides us with an in-depth discussion of these bodies, especially as they are represented in the *wasfs* (4.1-5//6.4-7; 5.10-16; 7.1-10) and the problems they have posed for various readers over the centuries, no matter what their methodologies (allegorical, historical-critical, text-critical, etc.). In more contemporary readings, unlike the earlier allegorical interpretations, neither is it the case that the bodies in the Song are suppressed, nor the text in general de-eroticized with respect to human sexual relations. However, other strategies are employed to mollify the disconcerting effect these images produce for seemingly adequate comprehension of the Song. In general, readers have manipulated the imagery to the point that they come to serve their expectations that love poetry will give flattering and realistic depictions of the lover. Black labels such an interpretive strategy a "hermeneutic of compliment". Of particular interest is the introduction of the question of gender, a question that will return productively throughout the book at crucial moments in Black's argument. As Black notes, feminist work on the Song is overwhelmingly positive. Feminists such as Phyllis Trible and Alicia Ostriker, for example, find the Song to be remarkably egalitarian in its presentation of love between the sexes. Or, as is well-known, the Song is understood to have been written by women and as such offers an alternative (even strange) voice in the context of the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, feminist readers have not questioned the hermeneutic of compliment that seemingly determines the interpretive responses available to readers. Black's book rightly challenges this hermeneutic through the concept of the grotesque, refusing to allow the somewhat vanilla presumptions about love poetry to dilute the startling and indeed de-stabilising effects of grotesque imagery.

Picking up on the frequent use of the word "grotesque" in contemporary scholars' descriptions of the bodies they encounter in the Song (Soulén, Waterman, Boer, Rudolph, Murphy, Segal), Black argues that it is precisely the grotesque that can provide us with a new hermeneutical

key/interpretive lens through which we might then be able to “ask challenging questions of the Song’s politics of representation and gender” (p. 64). In Chapter Two, “Uncovering the Grotesque Body”, Black gives us a fairly comprehensive tour through twentieth century critical discussions and theorisations of the grotesque in literature and art, notably from Bakhtin, Harpham, Barthes and Certeau. Underlying these theories is the idea that the grotesque participates in either the transgression or subversion of the hierarchically organised status quo, and thus places the subject of representation (both the reader of the text and the subject in the text) in a precarious state of being. The grotesque body is a body without integrity; it is a body in process, in a state of flux; it is, moreover, a body that speaks to the supposedly less noble, natural functions of digestion, excretion and reproduction. In other words, the grotesque body is a body that threatens to dismantle the image of the clean and proper, closed and contained body. As Black points out, while this body may be understood to be playful and humorous (Bakhtin), it is also an abject thing (Kristeva) that repulses the spectator at the same time that it compels the gaze. It is this status as spectacle that invites a gender-critical approach to interpreting the grotesque body, in general, and the Song’s bodies in particular.

Before asking what business such a disturbing body might have to do with (ancient Hebrew) love poetry, Black first has to establish the validity of the grotesque for reading the lovers’ bodies in the Song. This she does in Chapter Three, “Revealed and Concealed: The Grotesque Body in the Song”. After identifying the “first glance” impressions of the bodies as described in the Song – that they are indeed strange and difficult to comprehend in light of the context of love poetry – and the further influences these images have on the poem, Black then brings together the Song and some of the themes of the grotesque noted in Chapter Two. Themes such as nature (and the subject’s merging with it), the cycles of life, the body and its functions, sexuality, war and violence are shown to be at play in the images of the bodies of the lovers. (These sections are very detailed, and I cannot do them justice here.) Black is not interested in determining, somewhat anachronistically, the grotesque status of these bodies or whether or not the poet(s) purposefully put the grotesque to work in the poem. As she demonstrates in Chapter Two, the grotesque, as a specific aesthetic category, arises out of a particular socio-historical context and as such it may seem unfair to impose such a later category on to the much earlier biblical poem. Furthermore, to do so would require a normative picture of body in the Hebrew Bible with which to compare this grotesque version. Unfortunately, as Black remarks, the Hebrew Bible fails to provide such a clearly defined aesthetic of the body. This is not Black’s intention, anyway. Instead, she offers the far more interesting approach of taking the grotesque figurations seriously, as somehow necessary to the production of the lover’s discourse, with her thesis developed and delivered more fully in the final chapter of the book. In this chapter, however, Black demonstrates convincingly that, while the bodies obviously have grotesque qualities (compilations of sometimes disparate, sometimes consistent imagery, mutability, specularity, incompleteness, a tendency to disappear from view when most desired, etc.), the poem itself is just as shifty, incomplete and downright frustrating.

Both of these features – the grotesqueries of the represented bodies in the Song and the structural/narrative challenges of the Song as a whole – can be said to be responsible for the problems that scholars encounter when trying to interpret (control?) the Song. The effect of the Song on the reader, just like the effect of the sight of the grotesque body on the viewer, is one of disconcert, discomfort and lack of certitude. As Black shows, it is precisely the grotesque that “prompts the viewer or reader to struggle to make sense of what he or she reads/sees” (p. 174). The question as to whether the reader ever succeeds in this endeavour is a difficult one, given that the very “efficacy of the grotesque depends precisely on keeping the viewer/reader in a marginal state – between sense and nonsense, beauty and ugliness, attraction and repulsion, and the like” (174). And yet, Black continues, surely we can speak of the grotesque’s effect on readers/viewers in some meaningful way, as Bakhtin, Barthes, Certeau and others (including Black) have indeed done? This

point issues in Black's principal argument that the grotesque provides an ulterior, or rather "alterior" mode of speaking:

... what (the grotesque) really indicates for the Song is an *other* discourse: an ulterior – or *alterior* – way of speaking. This mode of speaking applies both to the lovers who speak and to the text in which they speak. In short: the lovers communicate something of this alterity in their descriptions of each other. And, taken as a whole, the Song of Songs represents speaking *other-ly* in its presentation of love and desire. (p.194)

So, the grotesque alerts us to the fact that this discourse is attempting to represent what cannot be represented through the usual modes of articulation: love. It is thus only by foregrounding the grotesque that we might better come to understand something of the nature of the lovers' discourse in the Song.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of mystical discourse, specifically Teresa of Avila's use of the Song to explain how the soul comes to know God. Mysticism, like the grotesque, is another discourse that manifests a struggle for meaning and utilises the language of love and eroticism. Following Certeau, Black pursues the idea that the mystical/Canticle subject-in-love originates out of absence or loss; there is an emptying out of the subject to make way for the subject-in-response, the subject-in-love:

The absence to which Certeau refers, and which I perceive to be evident in the Song's subjects, is not a matter of the disappearing lover, but the lover who has replaced him- or herself with the other. This is not a matter of self-denial or self-effacement (though many might argue this is part of the mystical personality); rather, it is the only solution to coping with the struggle over that which cannot be articulated. (p. 182)

Again following Certeau, Black notes that the mystic and the lover need to build not only a new subjectivity able to speak as lover, but also a new place *from which* to speak. While for Teresa, this space is the "Interior Castle" (p. 183), for the lovers of the Song it is the body of the other that serves as the place from which the lover might speak the unspeakable discourse of love. In other words, a lover-subject does not speak from the place of his or her own body but from the imagined site of the beloved other's body.

And yet, the lovers' bodies in the Song are grotesqueries. Why? Why does the lover construct this bodily house of language, so to speak, as what we may now recognise as a *grotesque* figuration? And importantly, does the gender of the lover-speaker matter, especially given that it is mainly the male lover who depicts his female beloved's body, and through more exaggeratedly curious imagery? These questions are taken up in Chapter Four, "On Reading the Grotesque (Erotically)". This complex chapter, which develops three main lines of inquiry, can really only be understood properly after a close reading of the earlier chapters (I wouldn't advise reading the final chapter first, in other words). First, Black asks what kind of speaking the presence of the grotesque enables ("What, then, is the nature of this speaking? Why should the lovers speak through the grotesque, and what does it convey about their relationship?" p. 186). Second, Black asks whether the Song tells us anything about the gendered nature of the status of the subject in love. Finally, she examines the complexities of reading (and loving) the Song with respect to the ambivalence effected by the collocation of the grotesque and the erotic. While the third area will interest those concerned with questions of textual affect, and especially those interested in Barthes' erotics of reading, it is the first and second lines of inquiry that really interest me, and so I shall focus mainly on them here (though, in the end, all three are related).

As I mentioned earlier, the argument is that the grotesque provides an ulterior or "alterior" mode of speaking desire for the other; it enables the discourse of love by offering an adequate site from which to endlessly defer the fulfilment of desire – to keep the beloved coming back. So, how is it

that the grotesque and the erotic work so well together? The argument is made most clear in the Kristeva section, “Desire and the Grotesque: Reading the Song of Songs with Kristeva (and Teresa)”, where Black returns to Kristeva’s notion of the abject (discussed in detail in Chapter Two) and her related work on love. (Importantly, and somewhat infamously, Kristeva has written at length on the Song.) With Kristeva, Black argues that it is precisely the grotesque’s ability to generate unsettling effects that enables love to thrive:

The grotesque does not complicate the lovers’ desires for each other, though it may appear to, nor does it negate them. It is, by contrast, a necessary and natural part of their survival. Love is a conflictual site, where in the first instance, the lover must encounter the conflict of his or her own self, that which exists between what is abjected and what is desired... With the benefit of Kristeva’s work, we can say that in order to ensure the effectiveness of love poetry, the grotesque and the erotic (of which desire is the central part) both ensure the other thrives: the grotesque cannot exist without the urge to make it otherwise (the grotesque body cannot exist without the lover’s longing to see perfection and the ideal) and desire would expire if not continually threatened by its corruption (the lovers’ desires would be effaced if allowed to be consummated and completed). The grotesquerie of the body keeps desire in the Song alive: it contains the endless complications and foreclosures of desire that ensure that the Song of Songs works as a text of *jouissance*. (pp. 228, 229)

So, the grotesque enables us better to understand the nature of the Song as amatory discourse, without resorting to the usual strategies that endeavour to ease the disconcerting effects of the bodily imagery and without having to embrace a hermeneutic of compliment. Moreover, by examining the Song through the lens of the grotesque we can also gain insights into our own love for the text as readers. I have no problem with this argument whatsoever. I do have a problem, however, with what in the end is a universalising of the subject-in-love (and this, I admit, is a problem I have with Kristeva). While Black claims that the grotesque enables us to “ask challenging questions of the Song’s politics of representation and gender” (p. 64), and while there are super discussions of feminist criticisms of the grotesque (pp. 100–116) along with incisive, close attention paid to the different depictions of the male and female bodies (esp. pp. 159 – 165, 192 – 205), Black’s conclusion is that ultimately “gender is not the issue” (p. 236). Now, Black is *not* saying that gender does not matter – the predominance of the man’s descriptions of the woman, casting the woman as object of the gaze, and the ever-problematic beating of the woman in 5:7, are features that cannot be ignored or dismissed – but rather wonders what it is, exactly, about gender that matters:

What is troubled by gender issues? Is it the woman’s liberty; the man’s social and cultural autonomy; the reader’s sensibilities; the feminist reader’s demands? In short: is it our expectations as readers? Undoubtedly it is. But it is also more than this. In both lovers, we are able to see the shifting, voluble self as it encounters the other’s gaze, as it finds in the other a place to speak, as it worries over the other’s distance. The self – male or female, lover or other – offers reflections on various parts of the process of becoming *the subject who loves*. Gender differences, however we come to interpret them, seem a tool to that effect. The woman’s place in the toolbox is both problematicized by and a crucial component of that dynamic. Radically, *the subject-in-love* must *become the woman* in the Song. She (or he) must be a spectacle by her (or his) own choosing; she (or he) must be turned into an autonomous, engaged subject, in order to love and live. (pp. 236-237; my italics)

Is it not problematic that the subject-in-love must “become the woman in the Song” (i.e. assume that subject position), when the appropriation of the feminine consistently has been “performed” by men in various ways and to their great advancement, not ours (see, for example, Christine

Battersby's *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* [1989])? Is it really equitable when a man chooses to be a spectacle as when a woman might; is access to choice the same? But most importantly, can we really claim that, conceptually at least, to use the site of the other as an appropriated place from which to speak is going to be the same for a masculine and feminine subject? Is appropriating the site of the other really conducive at all to the production of love between two irreducibly different subjects? Luce Irigaray would say that this appropriation of the (site of the) other is precisely what prevents love between the sexes from occurring in cultures that value only the one subject position that, while apparently neuter, is actually masculine. In the end, I think what Black shows us is that the Song is very much consistent with the amatory discourse that is possible within patriarchal social symbolic systems, and it is a love poem that struggles to articulate a love for the other *as sexuate other*; in the end, the Song (and Black) falls back upon the logic of monosexuality wherein only one subject position is recognisable – *the* subject who loves. Again, this is largely the outcome one expects when Kristeva is brought, somewhat uncritically, in to the picture. Having said that, I am sure that such a sophisticated unveiling of this logic could not have been possible without the grotesque – we might even consider the possibility that the grotesque is *the* symptom of the impossibility of a genuine heterosexual love discourse. Thus, Black provides a remarkable contribution to the conversations concerning the difficult imagery in the Song and its continued place in the hearts of its readers, specifically, and the nature of love discourse in general. And I think that future work on the Song that does not reference and engage with this book will not be worth reading.